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Sent: Fri 8/14/2015 5:38:49 PM
Subject: Greenwire, 08/14: Mine spill reveals larger problems facing EPA

Mine spill reveals larger problems facing EPA

Published: Friday, August 14, 2015

It will take many years and many millions of dollars to manage the toxic wastewater that spewed a 100-mile-long torrent of heavy metals into Western rivers, experts said, but hundreds of thousands of abandoned mines remain to be cleaned.

Since simply plugging Colorado's Gold King Mine could lead to an eventual explosion of poisonous water elsewhere, the safest solution would be to install a treatment plant that would indefinitely clean the water from Gold King and three other nearby mines. It would cost millions to build and operate and would do nothing to contain the thousands of other toxic streams that are a permanent legacy of mining nationwide.

"They have been not pursuing the obvious solution," said Rob Robinson, a retired abandoned mines cleanup coordinator for the Bureau of Land Management. "My hope is this has embarrassed the hell out of them and they're going to finally take it seriously."

A U.S. EPA crew accidentally caused the recent spill while working at Gold King.

There are about 500,000 abandoned mines nationwide, and EPA has estimated it will cost between \$20 billion and \$54 billion to clean them all.

Under the federal Clean Water Act, the mine owner is supposed to control discharges, but Gold King's landowner, Todd Hennis, is not considered legally responsible for the cleanup because the mine stopped operating in 1923, long before the modern era of environmental protection.

"A lot of these are mom-and-pops, they've inherited the property or they bought it years ago before the environmental laws were passed, and they just don't have the resources," said Doug Jamison with the hazardous materials division at Colorado's state health department.

In Colorado alone, there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of abandoned mines discharging acid rock drainage, Jamison said. The potent stew of heavy metals accumulates as chemical reactions brew up sulfuric acid at concentrations high enough to dissolve steel, as well as leach poisons down mountainsides and into groundwater decades after mines close ([AP/Colorado Springs Gazette](#), Aug. 13).

Utah officials said yesterday that the plume had likely reached Lake Powell, although it has been diluted on the 300-mile journey to the reservoir and lost the bright yellow color seen closer to the spill site. Authorities said tests on Utah river water suggest the spill has dissipated enough that the water is safe to drink, and officials aren't expecting to see fish dying off at the lake ([Associated Press](#), Aug. 13).

In Nevada, officials are stepping up their sampling of Lake Mead, though they stress that the pollution is unlikely to reach the reservoir anytime soon, and when it does, it will not be a danger.

"The dilution factor is extremely high," said Dave Johnson, general manager for engineering and operations for the Southern Nevada Water Authority, noting that before it reaches the intake pipes that

supply about 90 percent of the Las Vegas Valley's water, the roughly 9-acre-foot plume of pollution will mix with more than 13 million acre-feet of water in Lake Powell and another almost 10 million acre-feet of water in Lake Mead.

"We completely expect this to be a nonissue for us," he said (Henry Brean, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Aug. 13). -- **BTP**